

# Observations on the Behaviour of the Brush-tailed Phascogale (*Phascogale tapoatafa*) at Black Hill, Victoria

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## Introduction

The brush-tailed phascogale or tuan (*Phascogale tapoatafa*) occurs in all mainland states of Australia (Cuttle, 1983). Its life history and behaviour under laboratory conditions were studied recently by Cuttle (1982a,b) but relatively little is known of its behaviour in the wild. It is regarded as being 'possibly threatened' in Victoria (Ahern, 1982) and is uncommon to rare in North Central Victoria (Menkhorst and Gilmore, 1979).

Black Hill Bushland Reserve occupies 48 ha at Edgecombe, 9 km north of Kyneton, Victoria (144°29'20"E, 37°11'15"S). The geology is of Devonian granite (Land Conservation Council Victoria, 1973), and the vegetation is an open-forest of *Eucalyptus obliqua* (messmate stringybark), with *E. viminalis* (manna gum) and *E. melliodora* (yellow box) being common on the lower slopes. There are scattered *Acacia dealbata* (silver wattle) above *Senecio quadridentatus* (cotton fireweed), *Hydrocotyle laxiflora* (stinking pennywort) and the exotic annuals, *Briaza* spp. (quaking-grasses) and *Aira* spp. (silvery hair-grasses).

## Observations and discussion

Two brush-tailed phascogales were observed during a spotlighting survey at Black Hill on 13 February 1986. The first phascogale was seen at 11.15 pm (E.S.T.) in an old messmate. The animal was actively foraging for food on the tree-trunk. It was extremely active, and rapidly bounded up and down the trunk and along the larger limbs. It did not appear to avoid the white spotlight. After six minutes of arboreal foraging the phascogale descended to the ground and began foraging in the ground litter. Ground foraging was

active noisy, and with little apparent caution. The phascogale then scurried up and over an old tree-stump, and across the ground to a sapling messmate, where it resumed hunting on the bark. It was lost to view at 11.26 pm after it descended to the ground once again.

A second phascogale was sighted at 12.02 am. It behaved in a similar fashion: actively foraging on tree-trunks and larger branches and frequently moving across the ground. While it was foraging in a messmate, a sugar glider (*Petaurus breviceps*) landed on a branch of similar height in an adjacent tree 10 m distant. The phascogale completely ignored the sugar glider and continued searching the bark for food. Similarly, the sugar glider appeared to take no notice of the phascogale.

Neither phascogale ventured onto the small, upper branches of trees; all arboreal movements were restricted to trunks and to large boughs. This behaviour was also noted by Fleay (1934). Fleay (1934, 1947) and Harrison (1961) also commented on the timidity of brush-tailed phascogales when confronted by sugar gliders.

Earlier observers do not appear to have recorded foraging on the ground by brush-tailed phascogales. Ride (1980) believed the species to be 'almost exclusively arboreal'. The brief observations from Black Hill suggest that ground foraging may contribute in a minor way to food gathering, perhaps by increasing the diversity or availability of prey species. Kitchener (1983) stated that the closely related, red-tailed phascogale (*Phascogale calura*) was "largely arboreal. . . [but] appears to feed extensively on the ground". Future studies may show that the brush-tailed phascogale forages on the ground more than is presently realized.

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## Erratum: *Westringia lucida* Boivin (Lamiaceae): A New Species for Victoria

BY ADRIAN PYKE AND JOHN WESTAWAY

These illustrations of *Westringia lucida* were inadvertently omitted from the paper published in the *Victorian Nat.* 105 (2) p.9. they are presented here with apologies to the authors.

Ed.



*Westringia lucida* x 1



*Westringia lucida* x 4

Illustrations by Miss V. Tellini.

Note: this species was recorded during a botanical survey for the Flora and Fauna Survey Group (Dept. Conservation, Forests and Lands). Results are reported in Pyke *et al.* (1988) *Flora and Fauna of the Clover and Pretty Valley Forests Blocks, N.E. region, Vict.* Vict. Ecol. Survey Rept. 25 D.C.F.L.